

LARSON



Sonya Larson <larsonya@gmail.com>

Note

Sonya Larson <larsonya@gmail.com>
 To: Norah Piehl <norah@bostonbookfest.org>

Thu, Jul 26, 2018 at 11:24 AM

Please see...

----- Forwarded message -----
 From: Ambrose, Graham <graham.ambrose@globe.com>
 Date: Thu, Jul 26, 2018 at 10:33 AM
 Subject: Re: Note
 To: Sonya Larson <larsonya@gmail.com>

Hi Sonya,

Thank you for this. I have read it and forwarded on to my editor. We are hoping to get out a story soon. Would you be willing to send us a photo to use with the story? Please just let us know to whom we ought to give credit.

Thank you!---
 Graham

On Wed, Jul 25, 2018 at 5:01 PM, Sonya Larson <larsonya@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Graham Ambrose,

I hope you're well, and I wanted to follow up on some things we discussed a few weeks ago.

So: I've been accused of plagiarism. I wrote a short story called "The Kindest," about a Chinese-American woman who receives a kidney donation from a white woman, which explores the complexities of indebtedness, addiction, love, shame, and race. I'm honored that it's being recognized by many writers as a piece of art with important things to say. But now a fellow fiction writer and altruistic kidney donor, Dawn Dorland, is alleging that a letter in my story plagiarizes a letter that she once posted on Facebook.

I know of Ms. Dorland's personal story, and I did see her letter. What struck me most about it was its self-referencing tone, and that tone is what I sought to capture, comment on, and critique in a wholly fictional story, in which a person of color resists a white savior narrative.

This is what fiction writers do. We regularly encounter ideas, language, and inflections in the world—whether from ad copy, menus, to-do lists, receipts, letters, websites, catalogues, tombstones, calendars, or tweets—and we re-imagine and transform their elements for completely fictional narratives. It's part of the artistic process, along one's way toward making art that is inevitably and entirely new.

I was interested in the tone of Ms. Dorland's letter because it reminded me of the tone employed by white saviors in white savior narratives—a common fictional and real-life trope in which a white hero rescues people of color from their doom, who are then expected to be openly grateful.

Much of my fiction is about the emotional logic of racism, revealed not by what is said but by what is inadvertently communicated. I spent nearly four years in my MFA Program studying how to say the unsayable with form—via tone, syntax, rhythm, pitch, gaze, and psychic distance. I use these tools in my fiction to articulate a psychological blindness in my characters, and the fear, guilt, and rage they exhibit when challenged. My story "Gabe Dove," which was anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories 2017*, is about internalized racism in the context of sex and dating. "Q County Colored Penitentiary," also published last year, is about a well-meaning white liberal who works to improve conditions for people of color, but fails to work for their liberation.

I wrote "The Kindest," among several reasons, to unearth and point a finger at what allows the white savior narrative to continue in 2018. If a reader subconsciously aligns herself with this narrative, or thinks its dynamics are innocuous—in other words, if she gives her benefit of the doubt to whiteness—then she will not see this dynamic in "The Kindest." She will attend to the story's other conflicts. *What the hell is Chuntao's problem?* she might think. *Why can't she just thank Rose?*

However, if she does not align herself with the white savior narrative—if her ears are pricked for it—then this dynamic will be loud and aggressive. It will dominate all other conflicts. *What the hell is Rose doing?* she might think. *Don't you dare try to sit in Chuntao's zitan chair.*

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I aimed this story sharply at the white liberal blind spot. It's about what people notice and don't notice about their own privilege. The story functions as a Rorschach test, much like "the dress" photograph of February 2015: is it black and blue, or white and gold? "The Kindest" is not to be read by oneself and put down; it is to be debated among whole groups of people, to dig up and examine these racial dynamics in our culture.

To be clear, the white savior narrative—to the best of my knowledge—has *nothing* to do with Ms. Dorland's personal story. I have zero reason to believe that Ms. Dorland was motivated to donate her kidney by wanting to save a seemingly down-and-out person of color. My piece is *fiction*. It is not her story, and my letter is not her letter.

And she shouldn't *want* it to be. She shouldn't *want* to be associated with my story's portrayal and critique of white savior dynamics. But her recent behavior, ironically, is exhibiting the very blindness I'm writing about, as she demands explicit identification in—and credit for—a writer of color's work.

I don't want to publicly associate Ms. Dorland with my story for two reasons: First, my story has nothing to do with her, and my letter is not a copy of hers and doesn't require citation. And secondly, I honestly think that associating my fictional story with Ms. Dorland—as she emphatically wants—could have negative consequences for *her*: I don't want readers to imagine my story's white savior (and her letter) as related in any way to a real, living person. Because then what? Would readers then speculate that the real-life Dawn Dorland has some sort of white savior complex? There is zero reason to think that—zero.

I honestly think that 'the kindest' thing I can do for Ms. Dorland is emphasize the distance between my fictional story and her real story, between my fictional letter and her real letter. Because there *is* distance—a very vital one. And that distance protects both my fiction and the beauty of her personal story—which is, and remains, hers.

I'm also attaching a copy of the story, just in case you don't already have it.

Sincerely,
Sonya Larson

—
Graham Ambrose
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